

# “Colonial Inheritance and Educational Inequity: An Analysis of the English-Only Curriculum in Postcolonial Zambia.”

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**Abstract:** *This paper critically examines the enduring impact of colonial language policies on Zambia’s education system, demonstrating how an English-only curriculum perpetuates linguistic hierarchies, marginalizes Indigenous knowledge, and deepens socioeconomic inequities. Drawing on postcolonial theory and Afrocentric notions of Ubuntu, I conduct a document review of key policy texts—including the Education Act of 2011 and the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework—alongside relevant scholarly literature and comparative case studies. My analysis highlights both the historical roots of these inequities and practical pathways to decolonize the curriculum by integrating local languages and community-centered pedagogies.*

**Keywords:** colonial inheritance, educational inequity, English-only curriculum, postcolonial Zambia

## INTRODUCTION

The evolution of formal education in Zambia is indelibly marked by its colonial past, which established rigid frameworks and hierarchies that persist in contemporary schooling. Scholars like Kayira (2015), Kaunda (2022) and Mutuota (2019) argue that colonial education in Africa was originally designed not to nurture Indigenous knowledge systems, but rather to facilitate colonial administration and resource extraction. European colonial powers introduced curricula that prioritised the English language and European cultural norms over local languages and practices (Mwanza, 2016). This historical approach to education not only sought to indoctrinate the colonised population into a subordinate social order but also established a lasting linguistic hierarchy that privileges English over Indigenous languages (Kayira, 2008; Mamdani, 1996; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

Language policy during the colonial period functioned as a crucial mechanism for reinforcing the cultural supremacy of the coloniser (Chilisa, 2012; Lunga, 2008). English was imbued with the symbolic power of authority and modernity, and its adoption was seen as a prerequisite for the modernisation of the colonies. Indigenous languages, in stark contrast, were often relegated

to informal or rural settings and deemed unsuitable for the transmission of “advanced” knowledge (Kaunda, 2022; Mutuota, 2019). This privileging of English not only served the administrative convenience of the colonial state but also played a strategic role in moulding the intellectual and cultural orientations of the Zambian populace (Chishiba & Manchishi, 2016). This stemmed from a belief that “Indigenous children merely needed proper instruction to be remade as Europeans” (Prochner & Kabiru, 2008, p. 120). The situation further deteriorated after independence, as many African nations continued to use the languages of their former colonisers for government administration and as the medium of instruction.

In the postcolonial context, educational reform has attempted to confront these legacies, yet the enduring influence of colonial language policies remains evident. Despite the emergence of national policies that promise a more inclusive and representative educational system, the predominance of English in curricular and administrative affairs continues to manifest as a form of institutional inertia (Chishiba & Manchishi, 2016). This persistence poses significant challenges as contemporary education in Zambia grapples with the need to balance global imperatives with local cultural realities. The postcolonial challenges in education, particularly in relation to language policy, thus encompass not only issues of accessibility and educational equity but also profound questions regarding national identity and cultural preservation.

### **Purpose and Significance of This Paper**

Examining the language of instruction in Zambian education is critical for unravelling the enduring postcolonial legacies embedded in the country’s educational and socio-political fabric. This paper is predicated on the understanding that language functions not only as a mode of communication but also as a potent symbol of cultural capital, social stratification, and political authority (Thiong'o, 1981). The paper illuminates how the persistence of an English-only curriculum in Zambia reinforces colonial hierarchies, marginalises Indigenous languages, and shapes power dynamics in contemporary society. This educational paradigm not only limits the potential for culturally relevant pedagogy but also perpetuates inequities by privileging a colonial language that is more accessible to urban, elite populations. As such, the continued emphasis on English as the medium of instruction is intrinsically linked with historical and systemic patterns of exclusion, raising vital questions about the role of education in fostering an inclusive national identity in a postcolonial context.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT: EDUCATION AND COLONIAL LEGACIES IN ZAMBIA**

### **Colonial Education Policies**

The historical context of formal education in Zambia is grounded in mission schools and later, the colonial education system (Chishiba & Manchishi, 2016; Mwanza, 2016). Therefore, the history of Zambia’s education system cannot be understood without first examining the colonial context in which it was established. During the colonial period, European powers imposed their cultural, social, and political values on their colonies (Mutuota, 2019; Thiong'o,

1981), and education was a primary vehicle for achieving these aims. A critical feature of this process was the introduction of the English language, which colonial authorities promoted as the language of modernisation, progress, and governance.

The introduction of English during colonial rule was not incidental but rather an intentional policy designed to inculcate European ideals and practices among the Indigenous population. The colonial administration viewed English as a superior language that embodied the cultural, scientific, and political advancements of the West (Kayira, 2005; Lunga, 2008). Consequently, English was established as the medium through which critical knowledge and administrative practices would be transmitted (Chishiba & Manchishi, 2016). This decision was rooted in the belief that local languages were inherently inferior or unsuitable for conveying the technical and intellectual content of modern education (Chabal & Daloz, 1999).

In implementing these policies, colonial powers pursued objectives that went beyond mere language instruction. Their overarching goals in establishing formal education included the control, assimilation, and administration of the colonised society (Mutuota, 2019). Education was used as a tool of social engineering to create a class of intermediaries, often referred to as “native elites”, who were expected to serve the administrative needs of the colonial state while remaining estranged from their own cultural roots (Kaunda, 2022). This approach ensured that the social order remained firmly under colonial control, with a clear demarcation between those who had access to English and thus the privileges of modernity, and those who did not (Mamdani, 1996).

These colonial education policies effectively laid the foundation for the future trajectory of Zambia’s educational system. By privileging English and the Western canon, the colonial authorities not only created a system that produced a limited number of formally educated individuals but also sowed the seeds of a linguistic hierarchy that would have lasting repercussions (Lunga, 2008). The legacy of these policies is evident in the later complexities of language use in the postcolonial era, wherein English continued to serve as a marker of social and cultural capital.

### **Establishment of Language Hierarchies**

Central to the colonial educational endeavour was the establishment of language hierarchies that positioned English as inherently superior to the array of Indigenous languages spoken across Zambia. English was cast not only as the language of governance and administration but also as the medium of intellectual discourse and socio-economic advancement (Kaunda, 2025). This hierarchical positioning was instrumental in marginalising local languages and cultural expressions.

The superiority ascribed to English was, in many respects, a reflection of the colonial mindset. Indigenous languages were often dismissed as unsophisticated or even primitive compared to

the perceived rationality and order inherent in English. This ideological construct served several purposes. It justified the use of English as a gatekeeper to educational and professional opportunities, thereby reinforcing the stratification of society or the ‘othering’ of people. Kayira (2015) states, “the colonisers viewed the colonised through a lens that created a sense of ‘othering’. This ‘othering’ was hierarchical and dualistic (e.g. superior/inferior, civilised/savage, ruler/the ruled, developed/developing, scientific/magical) so that colonies were viewed as needing the West’s ‘betterment’, thus justifying the colonial project” (p. 108).

Moreover, this linguistic hierarchy was instrumental in curbing the influence of traditional knowledge systems. Local languages, which were the repositories of Indigenous wisdom, cultural practices, and social norms, were relegated to the private and informal realms, effectively sidelining them from the processes of formal education and modern governance (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

The long-term implications of this imposed hierarchy have been profound. As the colonial education system was institutionalised, the privileging of English not only diminished the status of Indigenous languages but also engendered a socio-cultural landscape in which cultural authenticity was measured in terms of one’s proficiency in English. This process of linguistic marginalisation has had enduring effects on local cultures and knowledge systems. The erosion of Indigenous languages in favour of English has led to the gradual diminishment of oral traditions, local narratives, and traditional pedagogical methods—a loss that has significant cultural and epistemological implications for Zambian society.

Broadly speaking, the imposition of a knowledge system delivered in English has also affected how knowledge in higher learning and research institutions is viewed. Ezeanya-Esiobu (2019) argues that, “owing to westernisation of knowledge, the term ‘scientific knowledge’ has come to be synonymous with knowledge itself, but in the true sense of the word, science is only a variation of knowledge” (p. 7). What this means for Indigenous people is that, firstly, Indigenous knowledge is a variation of knowledge akin to Western scientific knowledge, and secondly, Indigenous knowledge can and should serve either to complement or to provide an alternative to Western science, which is emphasised in formal education systems established during the colonial era.

### **Transition to Postcolonial Education**

The transition from colonial to postcolonial education in Zambia has been marked by both continuity and contestation. After independence in 1964, as in many African nations, Zambia continued to use the language of the former coloniser for government administration and as the medium of instruction (Kaunda, 2022). The decision to maintain colonial languages in postcolonial Africa, including Zambia, was driven by several factors, including the desire for national unity and the perceived necessity to maintain international competitiveness, as noted by Chishiba and Manchishi (2016).

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Although Zambia achieved political independence in 1964, the educational structures established during the colonial period remained deeply entrenched. The persistence of these colonial models is evident in the ongoing emphasis on English as the medium of instruction and the sustained marginalisation of Indigenous languages within the formal education system (Kaunda & Ailwood, 2021).

In the early years following independence, there were concerted efforts to reform the education sector to better reflect the newly asserted national identity and the diverse cultural heritage of the Zambian populace. However, these reform efforts were often hampered by the inertia of colonial institutional practices and the widespread perception that English was indispensable for participation in the global economy (Kaunda & Ailwood, 2021; Simamuna & Mulenga, 2017). Thus, while postcolonial reforms aimed to democratise education and promote local languages, the practical realities of implementation were often circumscribed by the deep-rooted legacy of colonial policies (Bhabha, 1994).

Continuities between the colonial and postcolonial periods are apparent in the way language policies have been maintained with little substantive change (Kaunda & Ailwood, 2021). The privileging of English has continued to function as a marker of academic and professional distinction, often at the expense of Indigenous languages. Yet, there have also been notable discontinuities. In the postcolonial era, there exists a growing recognition of the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy and the need to incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems within the curriculum (Kaunda, 2025). Despite this recognition, efforts to fully integrate local languages into the education system have met with structural and political challenges. For instance, debates persist about the feasibility of bilingual education models and the capacity of Indigenous languages to serve as robust vehicles for all academic subjects, especially at higher levels of instruction (Mwanza, 2016).

The lingering influence of colonial models in Zambia's education system underscores the complexities of educational reform in a postcolonial context. On one hand, the established norms of an English-only curriculum continue to facilitate participation in international networks and provide access to global knowledge (Kaunda, 2022). On the other hand, this model is at odds with the need to affirm and revitalise Indigenous linguistic and cultural traditions. The contradictions inherent in this duality reflect the broader tensions in postcolonial education, wherein the demand for modernity and global integration competes with the imperative for cultural authenticity and self-determination.

## **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

The debate surrounding language policy in postcolonial education in Zambia and in other postcolonial countries is multifaceted, involving theoretical, empirical, and policy-oriented perspectives. This section explores the contributions of postcolonial theorists in shaping our understanding of language and power, assesses empirical evidence from academic outcomes

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and case studies, and considers counterarguments and policy justifications advanced by proponents of an English-only approach.

### **Postcolonial Theoretical Perspectives**

Postcolonial theory provides a critical framework for examining Zambia's language policy, particularly the dominance of English and its implications for cultural identity and educational equity. Central to postcolonial theory is the assertion that colonial practices persist long after the end of formal colonial rule, continuing to shape cultural, political, and linguistic institutions (Lunga, 2008). Scholars in this field argue that language is not merely a neutral tool of communication, but a critical mechanism for the perpetuation of power structures and cultural dominance. As Bhabha (1994) has argued, language is deeply implicated in the reproduction of colonial ideologies, serving as a medium through which the hegemonic narratives of colonial powers are internalised by postcolonial subjects. In Zambia, the enduring status of English as the medium of instruction reflects this persistence. Despite the country's rich linguistic diversity, English has remained the official language of education since the colonial era, as reinforced by the Education Act of 2011 and the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 2023). This institutionalisation of English not only facilitates global engagement but also marginalises Indigenous languages, thereby reinforcing colonial hierarchies and cultural imperialism (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Ashcroft et al., 1995).

Edward Said's work on Orientalism (1978) further reinforces the notion that language plays a central role in the construction of cultural identities and power relations. Although Said primarily focuses on Western representations of the Orient, his insights are applicable to the postcolonial context of Zambia. English, as the language of the coloniser, carries with it a history of imposing Western standards of rationality, modernity, and authority. In this light, the English-only curriculum can be seen as a manifestation of cultural imperialism, whereby local languages and cultural practices are rendered subordinate to Western ideals.

Additionally, scholars such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) critique the lingering effects of colonial education policies that privilege English over Indigenous languages. He argues that the continued reliance on English in postcolonial societies like Zambia perpetuates a form of epistemic violence, wherein the knowledge systems embedded in local languages are systematically devalued. This theoretical framework suggests that language policy is not merely about educational outcomes but is deeply intertwined with questions of identity, power, and resistance. The arguments of these theorists underscore that the dynamics of language in Zambia are reflective of broader postcolonial struggles, where the contestation over language use becomes a proxy for the fight over cultural autonomy and self-determination.

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## **Empirical Evidence and Case Studies**

Empirical evidence on academic outcomes in contexts with an English-only curriculum versus multilingual education models offers critical insights into the practical implications of language policies. Numerous studies have highlighted that students who receive instruction solely in English, particularly in regions where English is not the predominant language at home, often experience diminished learning outcomes (Chishiba & Manchishi, 2016; Tambulukani, 2015). For instance, research indicates that early education in the mother tongue facilitates better comprehension, cognitive development, and academic achievement, especially during the formative years of learning literacy and numeracy (Benson, 2008; Cummins, 2000). These studies reveal that a shift from English-only instruction to multilingual education can lead to enhanced academic performance by bridging the linguistic gap between home and school environments.

Statistical data from various developing countries provides further evidence supporting the benefits of bilingual or multilingual education models. In sub-Saharan Africa, experimental and longitudinal studies have demonstrated that children who begin their education in their native languages exhibit higher levels of reading comprehension and mathematical ability compared to those taught exclusively in English (UNESCO, 2013). Although direct comparative data from Zambia is limited, these international studies offer a persuasive argument for re-examining the efficacy of the English-only model in the Zambian context.

Moreover, comparative cases from other postcolonial contexts, such as India and South Africa, illustrate the diverse outcomes of language policy choices. In India, for example, multilingual education policies that promote regional languages alongside English have contributed to more inclusive educational systems, mitigating the adverse effects of linguistic hegemony. In contrast, the persistence of an English-only curriculum in certain parts of South Africa has been linked to educational disparities and social stratification along linguistic lines (Mahtani, 2014). These comparative case studies provide a broader contextual framework that underscores the potential advantages and challenges associated with multilingual education policies.

## **Counterarguments and Policy Justifications**

Despite substantial evidence favouring multilingual education models, policymakers and proponents of an English-only approach advance several counterarguments and policy justifications. One of the foremost arguments is that proficiency in English is vital for ensuring competitiveness in a globalised economy. In an era where the majority of scientific literature, international business, and technological innovation are dominated by English, a robust command of the language is often seen as essential for participation in global networks (Ministry of Education, 2023). Thus, the English-only policy is frequently justified on the grounds that it equips students with the linguistic skills necessary to navigate and succeed in an increasingly interconnected world.

Policymakers also maintain that the practical challenges associated with multilingual education, such as the scarcity of trained teachers, limited teaching materials in Indigenous languages, and inadequate infrastructure for language instruction, cannot be overlooked (Kaunda, 2022). Implementing a multilingual curriculum requires substantial investment and systemic reforms, which many argue may not be feasible given current resource constraints (Thomas & Thomas, 2009). Furthermore, some contend that efforts to implement mother tongue instruction at lower levels of education might inadvertently delay proficiency in English, thereby limiting students' future opportunities in higher education and global job markets (Benson, 2008).

Critics of multilingual policies also argue that such reforms may lead to a fragmentation of national identity, with diverse linguistic practices potentially undermining the unity fostered by a single, national language (Chishiba & Manchishi, 2016). In this view, the English-only curriculum is seen as a unifying force that transcends regional linguistic differences, thereby promoting national cohesion. Proponents claim that a common medium of instruction can facilitate smoother communication between diverse ethnic and linguistic groups, thereby fostering a sense of national identity and collective belonging (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

Balancing these competing imperatives of global competitiveness and local identity represents a central challenge for policymakers in Zambia. While the English-only model is defended as a pragmatic approach to ensuring future economic success, it also risks entrenching historical inequities and marginalising culturally rich Indigenous knowledge systems. This tension underscores the need for a critical reassessment of existing policies, one that takes into account both the immediate practical benefits and the broader sociocultural implications of language instruction.

In synthesising these critical perspectives and debates, it becomes evident that the discourse surrounding language policy in Zambia, and by extension in other postcolonial settings, is complex and multifaceted. Postcolonial theorists articulate a compelling argument for the recognition of language as a site of power and resistance (Kayira, 2015; Lunga, 2008). Thus, the debates over language policy are not merely academic; they have tangible implications for educational equity, cultural preservation, and socioeconomic development in Zambia.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative document-review methodology to examine how Zambia's English-only curriculum perpetuates colonial legacies and to explore pathways for decolonisation through Postcolonial theoretical lens. Document review was selected for its strength in tracing policy trajectories, ideological frames, and cultural assumptions embedded within official texts and academic literature (Bowen, 2009). Guided by postcolonial theory and the Afrocentric philosophy of Ubuntu—which emphasizes interconnectedness, communal



knowledge, and respect for cultural pluralism (Mangaliso, 2001, this methodology prioritises documents as communal artifacts that reflect both power dynamics and collective values.

### **Data Sources and Selection Criteria**

Key primary sources include the Education Act of 2011 (Section 98) and the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (Section 2.3.2), chosen for their legal authority over medium-of-instruction policy. Secondary sources comprise scholarly works on Zambian education and language policy (e.g., Chishiba & Manchishi, 2016; Kaunda, 2022; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013), historical analyses of colonial education (Kayira, 2005; Mamdani, 1996), and comparative case studies from other postcolonial contexts (Benson, 2008; Mahtani, 2014). Documents were included if they directly addressed language instruction, cultural identity, or equity in Zambian or analogous postcolonial settings. Excluded materials were those lacking peer-reviewed validation or relevance to the research questions.

### **Analytical Framework**

Analysis proceeded through thematic content analysis, iteratively coding text segments for evidence of (1) linguistic hierarchies, (2) institutional inertia, and (3) Ubuntu-oriented values (e.g., communal empowerment, reciprocity). Postcolonial theory informed the identification of discourses that privilege English as a tool of colonial continuity, while Ubuntu principles guided attention to passages that foreground collective learning, Indigenous epistemologies, and cultural resilience. Coding was performed manually to preserve the contextual integrity of each document and to honour the relational ethos of Ubuntu, which insists on close reading as a form of respectful engagement with communal knowledge (Letseka, 2012).

### **Trustworthiness and Reflexivity**

To ensure credibility, the study triangulated findings across multiple document types—legislation, curriculum guidelines, and empirical studies, thereby aligning with Ubuntu's emphasis on consensus and communal validation. Reflexive memos were maintained to track the researcher's interpretive decisions and to mitigate potential biases arising from the scholar's positionality. Ethical considerations included respectful citation of Indigenous knowledge and acknowledgment of the collective intellectual labour represented in historical and contemporary texts.

### **Limitations**

While document review provides rich insights into policy frameworks and scholarly debates, it cannot capture teachers' or learners' lived experiences. Future research should complement

this approach with field-based methods (e.g., Talking Circles and conversational interviews) to fully realise an Ubuntu-inspired, participatory inquiry.

This methodology thus situates the study at the intersection of postcolonial critique and Afrocentric Ubuntu philosophy, enabling a culturally grounded analysis of language policy and educational equity in Zambia.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

As of 2025, the education system in Zambia is governed by a dual framework of policy documents that together underpin an English-only curriculum. This section critically examines the policy landscape by analysing the Education Act of 2011, Section 98, “Language of instruction for educational institution”, followed by an in-depth review of the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework, particularly Section 2.3.2 “Language of Instruction”. Lastly, it explores the interplay between these legal instruments and the tangible realities of classroom instruction and curriculum design.

### **Education Act of 2011 (Section 98)**

A cornerstone of Zambia’s legal framework governing education, the Education Act of 2011, Section 98, is the basis on which language policies in education are formed. This statutory provision mandates that “the language of instruction at any level of the education system shall be English.” This legal codification is supplemented by explicit exceptions that provide the Minister of Education with discretionary authority over language policy. Section 98(2) of the Act authorises the Minister to: (a) approve any language in which a learner may learn to read and write; (b) determine a language for initial literacy and numeracy skills; (c) designate a compulsory language for any learner from basic to high school level in any locality; and (d) approve a language to be learnt up to school certificate level. These exceptions serve as a recognition of the multifaceted linguistic environment in Zambia, albeit within a predominantly English-centric paradigm (Zambia Education Act, 2011).

The legal mandate of the Education Act of 2011 thereby creates a structured yet flexible framework whereby the Minister’s discretion ostensibly allows for localised adjustments to the language of instruction. However, this flexibility is limited in scope and is often interpreted within a broader policy context that privileges English. While the Act acknowledges the potential utility of incorporating Indigenous languages, in practice, the authority vested in the Minister usually reinforces the longstanding dominance of English as the language of academic excellence, as evidenced in the current curriculum framework. As a result, the legal framework perpetuates an educational hierarchy wherein English is synonymous with progress and modernity, placing learners who are less proficient in English at an inherent disadvantage (Bhabha, 1994).

The implications of a legally mandated English-only policy extend beyond mere academic performance. The Act's stringent provisions contribute to a scenario in which language becomes both a medium of instruction and an instrument of social stratification. By cementing English as the exclusive language of formal education, the policy framework reinforces colonial-era legacies that continue to marginalise Indigenous linguistic and cultural practices. Consequently, educational inequities emerge, particularly affecting students from rural backgrounds and disadvantaged communities who may find the imposition of English alienating and exclusionary.

### **The 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (Section 2.3.2 “Language of Instruction”)**

The 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework, based on the Education Act of 2011 mentioned above, articulates clear provisions regarding the language of instruction, emphasising the centrality of English in the formal education system. Section 2.3.2 explicitly designates English as the primary medium through which curriculum content is delivered from early childhood education to tertiary. The rationale behind maintaining English as the medium of instruction is anchored in a perceived necessity to align Zambia with global academic, economic, and technological paradigms. Proponents argue that fluency in English empowers learners to access wider spheres of knowledge, enhances international competitiveness, and facilitates integration into a globalised economy (Ministry of Education, 2023).

The intended outcomes of the English-only policy, as delineated in the framework, include the creation of a uniform educational standard and the promotion of efficient communication within the diverse linguistic landscape of Zambia. This approach is believed to streamline the educational experience and minimise linguistic barriers in high-stakes academic environments. However, the framework's optimistic articulation of these outcomes contrasts sharply with practical implementation. In many schools, particularly in rural or socioeconomically disadvantaged regions, a significant gap persists between policy aspirations and on-the-ground realities (Mwanza, 2012). In contexts where teachers and students are not adequately equipped with the necessary language skills, the exclusive use of English can impede comprehension and hinder academic achievement (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019; Kayira, 2015).

Moreover, the prioritisation of English in the curriculum often overlooks the cultural and linguistic heterogeneity that characterises Zambia. The marginalisation of Indigenous languages restricts the transmission of traditional epistemologies, thereby diminishing individual identity formation and contributing to broader societal inequities (Kaunda, 2022). Scholars contend that the persistent emphasis on English not only compromises cognitive and academic outcomes but also perpetuates colonial legacies by reinforcing a hierarchical language order that devalues local linguistic resources (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Ferguson, 2006). Considering research on local language use in education, prioritising Indigenous

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language instruction emerges as a critical imperative. Such an approach promises substantial benefits for cognitive development, academic achievement, and the preservation of social and cultural capital, thereby warranting a thorough re-evaluation of Zambia's current language policies.

### **Interplay Between Policy and Practice**

The translation of these legal frameworks into classroom instruction and curriculum design represents a critical junction where policy ambitions confront local educational realities. The disconnect between policy intentions and classroom practices is conspicuous in the manner in which the language of instruction is operationalised at the school level (Mwanza, 2012; Kaunda, 2022). Despite well-articulated policies that envision English as a vehicle for academic excellence and national integration, many educators encounter practical challenges when implementing these directives in linguistically diverse environments.

Classroom instruction in many Zambian schools often reveals a tension between the aspirational aims of the curriculum framework and the lived experiences of teachers and students (Mutolwa & Mwanza, 2025). In urban centres, where there is greater access to educational resources and teacher training, the implementation of an English-only curriculum is relatively more successful. Conversely, in rural or under-resourced areas, the dominance of English can create significant barriers for learners who are more fluent in Indigenous languages than in English. This disparity exacerbates educational inequities, as students who struggle with the language of instruction are at risk of underperforming academically, further entrenching existing social and economic disparities (Mamdani, 1996).

Moreover, curriculum design itself is deeply affected by the prevailing language policies. The structure of textbooks, pedagogical strategies, and assessment methods are all crafted with an assumption of uniform fluency in English. As a consequence, these educational materials often fail to account for local linguistic realities, rendering them inaccessible to many learners. The resultant gap not only hampers effective learning but also limits the potential for teachers to adapt instructional strategies that might better accommodate linguistic diversity within the classroom (Mulenga, 2015).

Tensions between policy intentions and practical implementation are further amplified by the lack of robust mechanisms for monitoring and accountability (Serpell, 2006). While the policy framework provides the legal and administrative authority necessary to enforce an English-only curriculum, there is often limited oversight regarding how these policies are operationalised at the school level. Such gaps create space for educational disparities to widen, as the rigid imposition of English is not always matched by commensurate support for students who might benefit from a more bilingual or multilingual approach. The shortfall in teacher training programmes, the scarcity of teaching materials in Indigenous languages, and the

absence of structured support systems for non-native English speakers collectively contribute to the persistence of these challenges (Kaunda, 2022; Kaunda & Ailwood, 2021).

In essence, the interplay between policy and practice in Zambia's educational system encapsulates a broader struggle: the need to harmonise globally oriented educational policies with the linguistic and cultural realities of a diverse population. The legal endorsement of an English-only curriculum is steeped in historical and political rationales, yet its implementation inevitably engenders tensions in environments where local languages and cultures form the bedrock of daily life. This dichotomy between policy and practice underscores the complexities inherent in attempting to modernise an education system without adequately accommodating the plurality of its linguistic heritage.

### **Pathways Toward Decolonising the Curriculum**

Decolonising the curriculum in Zambia necessitates a critical reassessment and restructuring of language policies that have long perpetuated colonial legacies. This section outlines viable pathways for educational reform that prioritise Indigenous languages and local epistemologies, drawing on theoretical frameworks, empirical evidence, and successful case studies from comparable contexts (Chilisa, 2012; Mamdani, 1996).

### **Revisiting Language Policy: The Need for Reform**

A critical evaluation of existing language policies indicates that the continuation of an English-only curriculum reinforces colonial hierarchies while marginalising the linguistic and cultural resources of local communities. Key documents such as the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework and the Education Act of 2011 emphasise English as the medium of instruction despite the country's linguistic diversity (Ministry of Education, 2023; Education Act of 2011). Such a monolingual approach risks alienating students whose primary language is not English, resulting in barriers to early cognitive development and academic success (Cummins, 2000; García & Wei, 2014). Thus, integrating Indigenous languages and local knowledge systems into the formal curriculum is imperative, as these languages are critical vehicles for transmitting culture, history, and Indigenous scientific knowledge (Chilisa, 2012).

### **Models of Bilingual/Multilingual Education**

Empirical research from various postcolonial contexts highlights the advantages of bilingual and multilingual educational models. In Zambia, pilot programmes that incorporate mother tongue instruction alongside English have demonstrated improved literacy and enhanced overall academic performance (Benson, 2008). A pilot study implemented in both Mungwi District and Kasama Districts in Zambia, called the Primary Reading Programme (PRP), revealed that pupils taught in the Bemba language were able to read in Grade 1 and that their level in Grade 2 was equivalent to the level of Grade 4 pupils who were subjected to English as a medium of instruction during the early stages. As a result of the pilot study, literacy in

local languages was scaled to all schools in Zambia (Chishiba & Manchishi, 2016). This pilot study demonstrates that employing Indigenous languages for early literacy instruction can significantly enhance reading skills among young learners. The comparable performance between pupils taught in Cibemba and those taught in English at a later grade level suggests that early education in a learner's mother tongue may provide a more solid foundation for academic development. The success of this pilot study informed broader educational reforms in Zambia, culminating in the nationwide implementation of the PRP, which is ignored in the current curriculum.

Similar approaches in countries such as India and South Africa have yielded positive outcomes by ensuring regional languages are accorded parity with English in formal schooling (Kumar, 2009; Mahtani, 2014). Key practical strategies include developing culturally relevant teaching materials, enhancing teacher training to incorporate bilingual methods, and engaging communities to validate local languages as essential for cultural preservation and academic excellence (Bhabha, 1994; Loomba, 2005).

### **Implications for National Identity and Social Equity**

Reforming language policy carries profound implications for national identity and social equity. Legitimising Indigenous languages within formal education can foster a renewed sense of cultural pride and contribute to a more inclusive national identity that reflects Zambia's diverse cultural heritage (Chilisa, 2012; Banda, 2008). Moreover, integrating local languages can enhance social cohesion by validating the experiences of all community members and reducing educational inequities that stem from language barriers (Cummins, 2000). Ultimately, a decolonised curriculum that embraces linguistic diversity not only supports academic achievement but also strengthens social equity and empowers historically marginalised groups, paving the way for sustainable national development (Benson, 2008).

Decolonising Zambia's curriculum requires revisiting entrenched language policies, embracing effective bilingual education models, and implementing strategic reforms that foster cultural inclusivity and educational equity. Such efforts will ultimately dismantle enduring colonial legacies and promote a more inclusive, resilient, and equitable national education system.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Summary of Key Arguments**

This essay has argued that Zambia's English-only curriculum perpetuates colonial legacies through the reinforcement of linguistic hierarchies and power structures established during colonial rule. The evidence presented highlights that language policy in Zambia not only marginalises Indigenous languages but also adversely affects cultural identity, social equity, and educational outcomes (Mamdani, 1996; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). The prioritisation of English as the medium of instruction continues to institutionalise colonial dynamics, whereby

academic success, socio-economic mobility, and global competitiveness are disproportionately linked to fluency in a former colonial language. These elements collectively shape the nation's educational landscape, limiting the integration of local cultural practices and Indigenous knowledge systems (Bhabha, 1994).

### **Policy Recommendations**

To effectively decolonise the curriculum, both short-term and long-term reforms are necessary. In the short term, policy interventions should focus on revising language policies to incorporate Indigenous languages in early childhood education and foundational subjects such as literacy and numeracy. This can be achieved through pilot projects across diverse regions, supported by rigorous data collection and evaluation (UNESCO, 2013). Immediate measures include updating teacher training curricula to integrate bilingual instructional techniques and providing incentives for schools that successfully implement multilingual programmes (Chilisa, 2012).

For long-term change, a comprehensive overhaul of the national curriculum is recommended. This initiative should be participatory, engaging educators, linguists, cultural leaders, and community representatives to ensure that reforms are contextually appropriate and culturally affirming. The Government must allocate sufficient resources for curriculum development, research, and infrastructure improvements that support multilingual education, while international organisations and development agencies offer technical and financial assistance based on best practices from similar postcolonial contexts (UNESCO, 2013; Bhabha, 1994). Furthermore, establishing national language committees and advisory councils is essential to enable ongoing consultation and adaptive policy adjustments in response to evolving societal needs and global educational standards.

### **Call for Future Research and Action**

Despite the significant contributions of existing scholarship, notable gaps remain regarding the nuanced impact of language policy on diverse Zambian populations. There is a pressing need for continued empirical research to better understand the differential effects of bilingual and multilingual instruction on academic achievement and cultural resilience (Cummins, 2000). Future research should also explore effective models of curriculum reform that reconcile global competitiveness with the imperative to preserve Indigenous knowledge. This ongoing dialogue is essential for formulating informed policies that can recalibrate educational practices to be more inclusive and equitable.

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